# CORRUPTION IN THE SOVIET UNION

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CORRUPTION is present in varying degrees and forms in all but the most primitive societies. Certainly, the Soviet Union has not been immune. The national, regional and local press of the USSR contains myriad accounts of bribery, falsification of reports, party-state complicity in concealing corruption, misuse of public office and state funds, and patronage and nepotism in personnel appointments.

It is surprising that this enduring aspect of Soviet society has been subjected to so little scholarly examination. A primary obstacle to such examination is the fragmentary and indirect nature of the evidence provided by the official Soviet newspapers, magazines, and specialised Journals. Furthermore, sporadic campaigns of corruption-reporting may be consciously-designed efforts by the party leadership to discredit minority groups (e.g. the Jews). Thus, we encounter what might be termed the "corruption" of Soviet corruption reporting.

At the outset, however, we must devise a suitable definition of corruption—which is itself a risky matter, for the definition can easily become so all-encompassing as to lose its capacity to serve as a principle of differentiation. Samuel P. Tuntington perhaps comes closest to a workable definition of corruption for our purposes:

"Corruption is behavior of public officials which deviates from accepted norms in order to serve private ends."

**The Function of Corruption:** Thus, for an act to fit our definition of corruption in the Soviet context, it must, first, violate some stipulation of the legal, political, or administrative codes of the USSR. The second distinguishing characteristic is that the act must be committed in relative secrecy, an indication that the perpetrator(s) recognise that the act is objectionable in the eyes of Soviet society. Third, there must be a transaction of some kind whereby inducement is involved. Beyond a certain point, negative inducement clearly ceases to be corruption and becomes coercion.

More important is the question of why corruption exists in the Soviet Union, of the functions it performs in Soviet society and politics. Students of corruption have suggested that it is intimately related to a society undergoing social change. While, as we shall see below, it is true that certain types of corruption in the Soviet Union owe their existence to such a transitional situation in the more backward areas of the country, this hardly explains the persistence of corruption throughout what is basically a modern bureaucratic state.

What then explains the prevalence of bureaucratic and political corruption in the USSR? By examining the functionality of corruption, one may discover that the phenomenon is, in fact, an important feature of the system rather than an aberration.

A particularly persistent problem is the inability of the bureaucracy to deliver industrial raw material supplies on time and in the required quantities and quality.

The Soviet expression *blat* refers to the use of personal influence to obtain favors to which a certain department, enterprise, or official is not legally or formally entitled. The institution of the *tolkach* (or expediter) is also resorted to when the manager chooses to operate indirectly in achieving his ends. Yet, as interviews with Soviet émigrés reveal, such widespread informal mechanisms are not sanctioned by the rules or ideology of the system—i.e. they are corrupt.

What one discovers that in certain circumstances, corruption on a limited scale may make an important contribution to organisational efficiency and goal-fulfilment.

**Black-Market Bureaucracy::** This is not to suggest that corruption of the above order does not create its own problems. In other words, because of their particularistic nature, there is no guarantee that such corrupt relationships will produce a final result conforming to true or stated national interests or priorities. Consequently, the regime officially prescribes such behavior, presumably winking at it when favoured activities benefit and prosecuting it when the overall effects prove harmful.

Because of the rigidities of the Soviet command economy, there is a continual imbalance between supply and demand. To the extent that corruption works to equilibrate these two forces—i.e.. to introduce market (albeit, black-market) attributes into the command system—it can be seen to be functional.

There is also what has been termed "black-market bureaucracy", a form of corruption resulting from the fact that the Soviet government is equally unable to satisfy popular demands for services. Bribe-taking continues to concern Soviet leadership, as evidenced by Breznev's comment at the 24th CPSU Congress last year.

**Disequilibrium:** Whenever the centralized allocative mechanism breaks down in the face of serious disequilibrium between supply and demand—regardless of whether one is talking about baby-carriages or

apartment permits—corruption is likely to result, introducing market features in the command economy.

A report from the December 1969 session of the central Committee of the Azerbaidzhan Communist Party typifies this situation:

There is speculation in private homes and automobiles in the city; individual homes are being constructed by people who cannot afford them, and large plots of land were illegally taken from the state.

The most common participant in corrupt activities is the administrator or bureaucrat who is in a position to expedite a shipment or shunt goods and services off to the private consumer who is willing to pay the black-market price. As has been demonstrated above, such aspects of the Soviet system as poorly articulated bureaucratic channels and tautness in the supply of goods and services combine to encourage bureaucrats to accept bribes in return for performing illegal acts.

A striking feature of most of the cases of Soviet corruption open to our scrutiny is that they involve members of the Communist Party. The fact that corruption persists within the very institution which is supposed to monitor and control all aspects of Soviet life suggests the existence of a common interest impelling party members as well as other social groups to collude in the perpetration and/or concealment of corrupt acts.

For *blat,* bribery, misappropriation, and other forms of corruption to be successful, there must be the active assistance or acquiescence of others in its execution and in the evasion of detection or punishment.

The Soviets define *nomenklatura* as "a list, whose incumbents are approved by a higher party, governmental, or professional organization." Once the power to appoint key local officials has been diverted to promote private ends, the *nomenklatura* system can actually operate to protect corrupt officials. No criminal proceedings can be initiated against an official without the consent of the party organs to whose *nomenklatura* list he belongs.

**Not Transient:** What general conclusion can one draw from this examination of corruption in Soviet Society? First, it is clear that corruption, while not necessarily institutionalised, is an important feature of contemporary Soviet life and not just a transient phenomenon. One might say that the only thing worse than a society with a rigid, overcentralized bureaucracy is one with a rigid, overcentralized, and honest bureaucracy.

As we have already noted, lower party and government officials often find considerable common interest in moderating output goals, procuring resources, and collaborating to insulate one another from pressures exerted by their superiors. Interestingly enough, this provides enough evidence of strong interest articulation at the output or implementation stage of Soviet politics. One might suggest that it is at this point, rather than at the input stage, that particular interests are most effective in amending concrete Soviet policies.

The fact that party and government functionaries are intimately involved in Soviet corruption differentiates this phenomenon from the situation in certain Asian countries where corruption centred among groups that are denied access to formal political channels (e.g. minority groups or foreign companies).

**Integral:** Some forms of corruption in the Soviet Union are linked to the social transformation taking place in a modernizing USSR. In outlaying locales the various forms of corruption help to "humanize" social change and the harshness of elite-conceived plans for social and economic modernization. In Myron McMullan's words, "the degree of low-level corruption can soften relations of officials and people," or as Edward Shils stated, it "humanizes government and makes it less awsome"

From all this, it emerges that corruption is unlikely to be eradicated tomorrow in the Soviet Union, if only because of the important functions it continues to perform. It appears that corruption may be as integral to Soviet life as *Vodka* and *Kasha.*